

# Migration, multilocality and the question of return in Kyrgyzstan



Susan Thieme and Asel Murzakulova

Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek as well as Russia and Kazakhstan are major destinations for migrants from mountain areas in southern Kyrgyzstan. While some migrants return home with new skills, many people start to put down roots in other places. Livelihoods take on a multilocal dimension when people have responsibilities in different places. Impacts on rural development are remittance dependency, increasing labour shortage and a changed social care situation.

Southern Kyrgyzstan: grandparents look after their grandchildren while the parents are working in Kazakhstan (K. Ahmed)

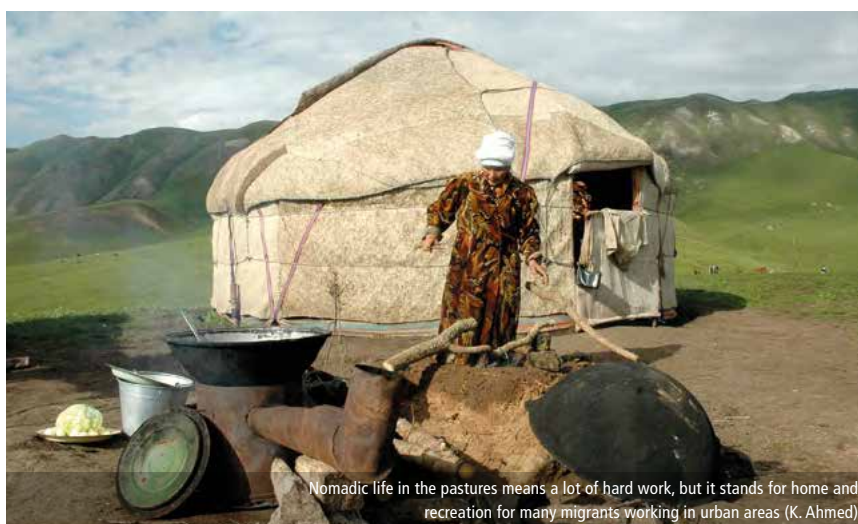
According to official statistics, 13 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population is seeking better economic opportunities abroad [1]. Southern Kyrgyzstan is particularly affected by migration. In the mountain areas of Batken and Osh oblasts, the working-age population migrates, while children and elderly people stay at home. As a result, people's livelihoods take on a multilocal dimension (Figure 1), with different implications for men and women of different generations. The elderly expect the younger generation to return to their home villages in the mountains, whereas younger people increasingly envision their future in urban areas of Kyrgyzstan, which offer better opportunities. They cannot imagine returning to their rural place of birth until after retirement.



Consequently, people invest their remittances both in a new urban home in Kyrgyzstan (particularly in the cities of Bishkek and Osh) and in their rural home. They keep up their transnational and national rural–urban linkages in order to retain the possibilities of returning to an urban centre in their home country and moving back to their rural mountain area of origin after retirement. Remittances have significantly improved the economic situation of households in the mountain areas of southern Kyrgyzstan. Nationally, remittances account for 30.3 percent of GDP [1]. Case studies in southern Kyrgyzstan have shown that a majority of households receive US\$ 50–100 per month [2]. Migrants also provide networks of access to medical care and education in urban areas, as well as jobs for subsequent migrants. Non-migrating family members take care of children, livestock and personal belongings and maintain the emotional base of the home. They also reduce the risks and uncertainty inherent in international mobility by providing a home that migrants can return to in the event of illness or deportation.

## Lessons learned

- Improve provision of social and economic services, health care and child care in rural areas. This will benefit non-migrants and encourage migrants to return.
- Encourage specific vocational education schemes to promote entrepreneurship, encourage investment by (returning) migrants and raise rural income levels.
- Devise mechanisms to include migrants who are absent for most of the year into local development initiatives, decision-making and training in fields that they continue to invest in and are keen on returning to. This will foster social cohesion and sustainable development in mountain areas.



But migration also has adverse side effects. It exacerbates the shortage of qualified services sector personnel in mountain areas, giving people more reason to migrate or not to return. Further, it entails the risk of illness or a job loss disturbing the delicate balance of debt and repayment, with potentially drastic effects for households that hardly have access to other sources of cash income than migration. Investment of remittances in animal husbandry poses a challenge to sustainable pasture management. Most people in mountainous southern Kyrgyzstan consider animal husbandry to be their main future source of livelihood, but they continue to use pastures in unsustainable ways. Investments may thus further exacerbate pasture overuse. A degraded natural resource base can then again become a driver of migration [3].

Besides remittances, migrants bring new skills and ideas to their places of origin. In the Kyrgyz–Tajik border region, for example, they have invested in horticulture. A number of villages have developed into important hubs for the trade and processing of apricots, which have become a profitable cash crop for export to Russia. In the arid Fergana valley, remittances are invested in drip irrigation. These kinds of investments can strengthen households' resilience to economic or environmental adversities, such as the Russian economic crisis starting in 2014, or spells of cold or dry weather.

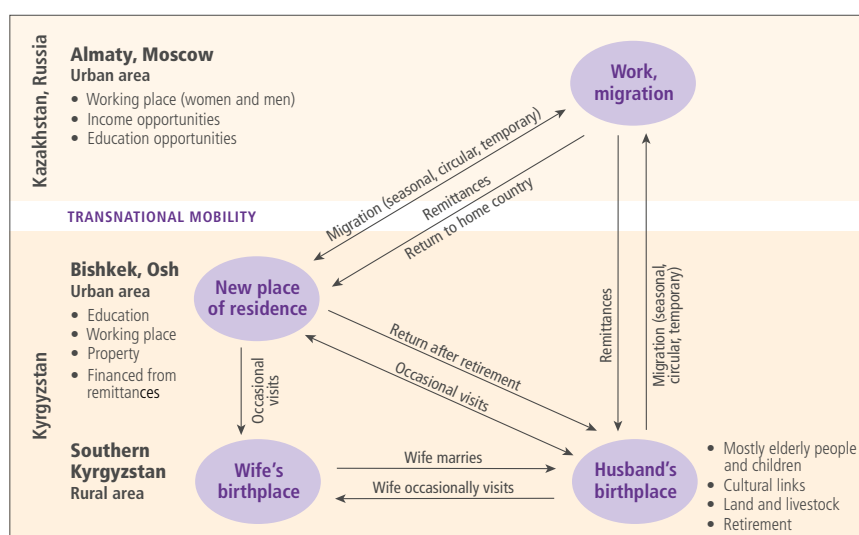


Figure 1. Multilocal work and family life, and places with different meanings (Chart: S. Thieme)